

## PSYCHIATRY

**Svendsen, Bent Borup.** *Psychiatric Morbidity Among Civilians in War-time.* Copenhagen, 1952. Munksgaard. Pp. 163. Publications of the University of Aarhus.

WITH the extending range of psychiatric activities and the claims of psychiatry for still larger hospital facilities for patients, the figures of psychiatric morbidity have recently become of special importance. The difficulty in obtaining statistically reliable figures in this field are considerable since a proportion of psychiatric patients, although handicapped in their social behaviour and adaptation, never enter hospital nor are ever seen by the general practitioners. This makes investigation of whole populations, using the census method, especially valuable. But these can only be carried out with any measure of exactitude in a circumscribed and stable population such as that of the Danish Island of Bornholm in the Baltic Sea where Strömgren and Fremming did their important surveys. From Strömgren's psychiatric department at Aarhus University originates the present study on the fluctuation of admission rates into mental hospitals and psychiatric in-patient clinics during and after the last war, covering the whole of Denmark.

The most interesting result of the study was that admission numbers decreased after the outbreak of the war and especially after the Germans had occupied the country in 1940. This number, however, began to rise again in 1944 and exceeded even the 1939 admission rate by the end of the observed period (1948).

While the decrease was mainly, but not exclusively, caused by a diminution of male patients, the subsequent increase of admissions was almost entirely in female patients. In interpreting this observation Dr. Svendsen takes all possible precautions: after surveying the psychiatric institutions in Denmark and their mode of function, he discusses the significance of the admission rate and its fluctuations in general, eliminates secondary

factors influencing it and corrects his figures accordingly. The increase in population during the observed period and its changing age distribution are taken into account, clinics are compared and contrasted with state hospitals, difference of regional fluctuations and the contribution of the various diagnostic groups are analysed. When all this is said and done he finally concludes that the decrease is "due to psychological defence reaction brought about in the Danish population by the presence of the German troops" of occupation; while the increase in female admissions is considered to be primarily due to the derangement of family life and "less to limited supplies and housing shortage". This hypothesis of an increased mental resistance and refusal to seek refuge in hospital, of strong community feelings and intensive common experiences on the incidences of such illness as schizophrenia seems to be supported by Svendsen's findings. The causes of the increase were obviously more complex. Cases of attempted suicide, women wanting an induced abortion, neuroses and psychogenic reactions in psychopathic personalities, all seem to have played their part in the increase in female admissions.

Nobody who knows the complex factors leading to psychotic illness and hospitalization will be astonished at the somewhat meagre and inconclusive results of this very thorough and well documented inquiry into the influence of war conditions on the admission rate of psychiatric hospitals. The merit of Svendsen's work is that, from his full information on the nature of special conditions of each hospital, he can account for even minor fluctuations, trace them to their origin and explain their nature. Such intricate knowledge, at the same time, makes the explanation of the general trend more difficult; hence the disappointment and the resort to such concepts as "psychological defence reaction" with the subsequent breaking down of these defences in the female part of the population. The explanations are probably right, but there is no definite proof that they are.

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